

Comment

WILLIAM MORRIS, USE-VALUE AND “JOYFUL LABOUR”

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Midway through *News From Nowhere*, William Morris’s visionary novel of an imaginary future socialist society, the time-travelling explorer Guest interrogates his host, Hammond, about his memories of how things were made in the bad old days of capitalism. Guest wonders: surely if things were produced for the world market, they must have been made very well? “Quality!” Hammond crustily replies, “how could they possibly attend to such trifles as the quality of the wares they sold? [...] It was a current jest of the time that the wares were made to sell and not to use; a jest which you, as coming from another planet, may understand but which our folk could not” (Morris 1890, 95-96). Now, by contrast,

The wares we make are made because they are needed: men make for their neighbours’ use as if they were making for themselves [...] Nothing *can* be made except for genuine use; therefore, no inferior goods are made. Moreover [...] we have now found out what we want, so we make no more than we want; and, as we are not driven to make a vast quantity of useless things, we have time and resources enough to consider our pleasure in making them. All work which would be irksome to do by hand is done by immensely improved machinery; and in all work which it is a pleasure to do by hand machinery is done without (Morris 1890, 97).

“Pleasure in making” things and their usefulness in meeting human needs lies at the heart of Morris’s vision of socialism and the central role which the “lesser arts” of the hand-made might play in such a radically reconstituted society. In a different idiom, we might say that for Morris the defeat of exchange value and the transcendence of alienated labour are the essential preconditions for any truly just and egalitarian society. The reassertion of use value serves as the foundation for the liberation of human creative energies. As Michelle Weinroth observes: “*Nowhere’s* constitutive conditions of creative praxis [are] joyful labour, equality, and variety, elements starkly at odds with the status quo (Weinroth 2015, 182).

Morris's dream of socialism is a totalizing one: it entails a root and branch revolution in capitalism's perverse political economy and alienated social relations. The ascendancy of use value over exchange value is also the victory of concrete, embodied human activity over abstract, value-producing, labour. "Morris's construct of Nowherian economics favours qualitative, indeterminate measure over quantifying, determinate rationalizations of commodity-based society" (Weinroth 2015, 187). Ending the rule of exchange value thus demands the abolition of the separation of mental and manual labour – of head and hand – in which labouring activity regains its artistic dimensions. As Weinroth and Leduc Browne conclude:

Inspired by the aesthetic practices of medieval times where art combines with everyday labour, the "minor arts" serve as the basis for Morris's revolutionary paradigm, generating a materialist aesthetic of beauty that portends the end of capitalism's class division. No longer the site of austerity and toil, work, reconceived, becomes satisfying and fruitful human effort, and aesthetic pleasure in labour. In positing that it must be attractive and desirable, rather than a mortification of the flesh, Morris allows work to regain its legitimacy in the company of art, and for the two to coalesce. Together they form a unique whole – a model of beauty suffused with the ethics of fellowship and equality (Weinroth & Leduc Browne 2015, 286).

Morris's impressive vision is at odds with many contemporary attempts to imagine a world beyond capitalism. A recent effort by Fredric Jameson disparages the very idea that work in any post-capitalist society might shed its most dehumanizing and alienating features. In Jameson's "American utopia," the best that we can hope for is a diminution in hours of work, but not its qualitative transformation.

I envisage a utopia of the double life, in which social reproduction, albeit only involving a few hours a day, is performed in work clothes and in teams, a little like going for army reserve duty [...] In the world of the superstructure, no such specifications hold; the individual is as free to be a recluse as a party person, to practice hobbies or to live out existence as a couch potato, to be a family man or professional mother, to volunteer for hospital work or to climb mountains [...] or to live whatever underground life can be invented (Jameson 2016, 83).

What is striking here is the sharp demarcation drawn between the worlds of work and leisure. The former has the inevitable taint of unpleasantness, however limited its duration; only in leisure do we enter the true realm of freedom. Jameson seems to believe,

as in Fourier’s *phalanstères* from which he draws inspiration, that we will still need armies of people (if not, as for Fourier, children,) willing to forego any immediate gratifications from their labour, so that the garbage gets collected.¹

This diminished vision of labour’s possible futures is not accidental, nor is it peculiar to Jameson; it is deeply coloured by labour’s degraded present. Moreover, it is rooted in a widely-held misunderstanding of contemporary finance capitalism; one that greatly exaggerates the autonomy of capital while negating the role of labour power as the use value most essential for the production of capitalist value. Elsewhere, Jameson argues that the ascendancy of finance capital achieves, “full autonomy ... a dimension in its own right” being “a play of monetary entities which needs neither production (as capital does) nor consumption (as money does): which supremely ... can live on its own internal metabolism and circulate without reference to an older content” (Jameson 1998, 160-161). As a consequence, “sensuous human labouring activity” comes to be seen no longer as the precondition of capital, but as a purely arbitrary adjunct to capital’s autonomous power. As Gail Day (2011, 216-217) has perceptively argued:

Marx takes economic forms to be the clearest indices of the historical changes to the organization of social relations. His concern is to establish where and how categories often assumed as transhistorical specifically operated within – or were determinate for – generalized commodity production. The historical specificity of exchange-value’s dominance is widely accepted today, but use value’s disappearance is often taken, mistakenly, to be the corollary [...] However, when considered from the perspective of form – more precisely, when considered as a historically determinate social form – use value becomes critically important in the case of two highly significant commodities: the money commodity and labour power [...] labour as a commodity, also has a specific use value, the capacity to create value [...] the very heart of capital’s social mystery; the role of use value as a determinate social form is decisive.

The detachment of exchange value from the use value of labour means that many theorists ultimately fall victim to the fetishism famously identified by Marx: the assumption that interest-bearing or “fictitious capital” is independent of the sphere of productive capital. Fictitious or finance capital, on this view, “is the consummate *automatic fetish* [...] money making money, and in this form it no longer bears any trace of its origin” (Marx 1975, 455). With the denial of human labour as its ultimate

¹ As for any association between art and beauty, Jameson (1998, 135) has already in other works labelled the very idea “meretricious.”

foundation, the seemingly autonomous world of finance capital “is transformed into a mere phantom of the imagination” (Marx in Harvey 1999, 269).

The rejection of the so-called “labour-metaphysic” – the idea that the secret of value lies in “precisely the use-value of the commodity purchased by the capitalist (i.e., labour-power)” (Marx in Rosdolsky 1977, 84) – has real consequences for the way in which we conceive of any post-capitalist future. For those, like Jameson, who both exaggerate the autonomy of capital and diminish the centrality of labour power, it should come as little surprise that the prospect of “joyful labour” of the sort proposed by Morris plays such a reduced role in his vision of a post-capitalist society.

For Marx, the possibility of socialism was immanent in the present. However, much labour had been debased and degraded by capitalism, the struggles and solidarities of today were always seen as a bridge to the future. Capitalism generates oppositional struggles and forms of consciousness immanently as the exploited and oppressed seek to improve their lives and conditions. Thus, while the use value of labour means one thing for capital, it means something entirely different for labour. As Michael Leibowitz (1992, 49) has observed, capital is incapable of producing living labour from within its own operations; therefore, “it is necessary to consider wage-labour as she exists outside capital.” This suggests that the richly variegated range of human needs that Marx associated with our ‘species being’ can never be fully captured by capital. Struggles to assert these needs against the imperatives of capital reach all the way down to questions of discipline and control over the bodies of workers both within and without the workplace and all the way up to our affective and creative needs and desires.²

This returns us to the “joyful labour” of the “lesser arts” and their place in Morris’s “dream vision” of socialism. Morris was no prelapsarian romantic spinning tales of rural idylls. In the tradition of Marx and Rousseau, Morris asserts that socialism “is a condition of society in which there should be neither rich nor poor, neither master nor master’s man, neither idle nor overworked, neither brain-sick workers nor heart-sick hand workers, in a word, in which all men would be living in equality of condition ...” (Morris 1894, 277). His insistence on fusing the medieval and the modern is what “continues to give Morris’s socialist radicalism its uniqueness and singular potency” (Weinroth 2015, 186). For Morris, the “lesser arts” which combine the useful with the beautiful are a way of (re)educating the senses and of accessing the true meaning of unalienated “joyful labour.” In this, it is difficult to think of another revolutionary thinker whose vision of a world beyond capitalism is so thoroughly embedded in the needs of the

² In the English-speaking world the importance of the concept of use-value in Marx’s work has been largely neglected. However, in other parts of the Global South, notably Latin America, where the “antagonistic contradiction” between use value and exchange value displays different configurations than in the Global North, more attention has been paid to the concept by Marxist theorists. Notable among them is Bolívar Echeverría whose work on use-value in the context of what he calls the baroque cultures of the Latin world, is summarized in Gandler (2016).

body. The essays collected in *To Build a Shadowy Isle of Bliss* have done us all a great service in rescuing this vision of a better world from “the enormous condescension of posterity” (Thompson 1991, 12).

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